



PROG
43,2

140

Received 26 November 2008
Revised 15 January 2009
Accepted 20 January 2009

Building a virtual branch at Vancouver Public Library using Web 2.0 tools

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the work undertaken by Vancouver Public Library (VPL) in an effort to convert its website into a true virtual branch, both through the functionality of the website itself and by extending its web presence on to external social networking sites.

Design/methodology/approach – VPL worked with its development partners to conduct a thorough community consultation to ensure that the new VPL website would be truly user-focused. Since the site's launch, VPL has made strategic management of both its internal and external web presence a key organisational priority, reflected in its creation of two new professional positions which include co-ordination of VPL's internal and external web presence as part of their job specification.

Findings – VPL has demonstrated that it is possible to take a systematic, integrated, thoughtful approach to the adoption of Web 2.0 tools and technologies in order to enhance web services without sacrificing quality or control.

Originality/value – As many public libraries consider their options with regard to the integration of Web 2.0 tools and technologies, VPL offers an example of good practice in strategic selection and management of these tools to optimise the delivery of web-based library services.

Keywords Worldwide web, Social networks, Public libraries, Information services, Canada

Paper type Case study

1. Vancouver Public Library: an overview

Vancouver Public Library (VPL) is the third largest public library system in Canada. It has 22 branches spread across the city of Vancouver, including the landmark Central Library and four large area branches. Vancouver itself has a population of approximately 600,000, and is located in the Metro Vancouver region (population two million) of Canada's province of British Columbia (BC – total population four million) (City of Vancouver, 2008a). Plate 1 shows a photograph of VPL's central library.

Vancouver is one of Canada's most ethnically diverse cities; approximately half of its total population are immigrants, and half of Vancouver residents speak a language other than English at home (City of Vancouver, 2008b). This culturally diverse population gives the city a unique character and has significant implications for library services, which work with a large English as a Second Language (ESL) user base.

In addition to its diversity, Vancouver is recognised for innovation, sustainability, a mild climate and stunning location between BC's coast mountains and the Pacific Ocean, a combination which has led to it being consistently rated one of the world's most liveable cities (City of Vancouver, 2008a).

Vancouver citizens have an encouragingly high ratio of library usage, with approximately 75 per cent of residents currently holding their own library card (Mustel Group, 2008). VPL's collections total just over 2.7 million items in 16 languages,





Source: Photo Credit: Cily Walker

Plate 1.
VPL's Central Library

including Canada's two official languages of English and French. In 2006 more than ten million items were borrowed from VPL; reference services offered in person, via e-mail, telephone and live chat answered almost one million questions; and 6.5 million individual visits were made to VPL branches (VPL, 2006). VPL also has an extremely strong commitment to the promotion of lifelong learning and information literacy, and in 2007 more than 160,000 library patrons attended more than 5,500 programmes and training courses offered by the library (VPL, 2007).

The library employs approximately 800 staff in a variety of classifications, including professional librarians, library technicians, library assistants, shelvers, and a wide range of support staff. The Central Library has six public service divisions offering specialised expertise in Social Sciences, Literature, Multicultural Services, Science, Business, Online Information, News, Fine Arts, History, Special Collections (focused on Pacific Northwest history), Reader's Advisory, Children's and Teen Services. The library also has its own inhouse Systems and Marketing departments, and a number of fee-for-service units such as the InfoAction research service and the Library Square Conference Centre.

In addition to providing services to citizens, residents and visitors to Vancouver, VPL also acts as a provincial resource, offering services to residents of BC's Lower Mainland and across the province through resource-sharing agreements that include circulation, reference services and electronic resources. VPL also co-ordinates the Ask Away province-wide virtual reference service, which is centrally funded by the Public Library Services Branch and to which every library service in the province contributes hours.

2. VPL's website: an overview

VPL has long considered its website (www.vpl.ca) to be its 23rd branch, and for many VPL users the website is literally "the library". In 2006 the website received

approximately 10,000 visits per day (an increase of more than 15 per cent over the previous year) and 3.5 million distinct logins – a total which, if viewed as foot traffic to a branch, accounts for a third of all visits to the library that year (VPL, 2006).

The website is both a cornerstone of the library's services, and the primary mechanism for communicating and marketing VPL's activities to its users. The site is used to deliver a huge range of information and services to patrons: more than 120 subscription databases; AskAway live chat reference; e-mail reference; more than 200 library-created research guides and annotated booklists; conference room bookings; news and press releases and a comprehensive events calendar of all library programmes and training sessions.

The website was originally created and launched in 1996, and received a look and feel redesign in 2000. However, the underlying architecture and content for the site remained virtually unchanged between 1996 and 2007, an eternity in technological terms. The intervening years saw massive advances not only in the management of web content and the library's own focus on delivering services via the web, but also in the expectations and technological awareness of library users. Figure 1 shows the VPL website as it was in the period 1996-2000.

The site's original architecture was based on the physical layout of the Central Library, with content grouped under the relevant subject division. While this made sense in the early days of the web, when parallels to the physical world were helpful for users still learning to navigate the unfamiliar spaces of the internet, by 2007 it had clearly become a source of confusion for library patrons who were not familiar with the Central Library and struggled to remember that in order to find legal information, for example, they needed to look under the heading "Fine Arts, History and Government" – the name of the VPL subject division responsible for this information. Figure 2 shows the VPL website as it was in the period 2000-2007.

The look and feel of the website, too, had begun to date by 2007. Navigation was based on a colour scheme that reflected the library's logo, with grey, light grey and dark grey navigation bars leading into different areas of the site. The lack of a uniform theme and purpose to the site had led to circuitous, densely layered navigation that provided multiple pathways to some content while bypassing other items almost



Figure 1.
VPL website, 1996-2000



Figure 2.
VPL website, 2000-2007

completely, and duplication of numerous content items that had not always been kept up to date in all the places in which they appeared. Completing the journey along to a piece of actual content often required eight or more clicks to work through all the navigational layers. The homepage had been structured to include as much information as possible, and was consequently extremely text-heavy.

By 2007, it was apparent that the website in its existing form was no longer meeting the needs of either the library itself, or its patrons. With the need for a complete overhaul of VPL's web services becoming increasingly pressing, the library partnered with two local companies, Open Road Communications and Karo design, to create a new website that would provide a modern gateway to library services, and a true virtual branch and online community space for VPL patrons.

3. The redesign of the VPL website

The key goals for the redesign were:

- *User-centred design.* On the new website, services and products will be arranged in a way that makes sense to users. Users will be guided to what they want and need. The website will be simple, easy to use, intuitive and support responsiveness to user feedback.
- *Interactivity.* Users will be able to interact with library staff and other users, to participate in the creation of content (forming a virtual community), and will be offered opportunities for personalisation.
- *Users' experience.* The website is a component of the library's overall service to users. Users should receive the same high-quality service in all mediums – be it virtual, in person or by telephone.
- *New graphic look/treatment.* The library's new website will be attractive, modern and solicit users to visit. The design will complement the library's existing brand.

- *Easy navigation.* Navigation will reflect most frequently performed or attempted tasks. It will focus on task orientation rather than organisational structure. Multiple paths will be created to key pages/destinations. The number of clicks required by users will be reduced overall.

Additionally, the redesign sought to simplify staff processes for content creation and maintenance, provide seamless standardised content rendering, and create a flexible, scalable website that would maximise the potential of the web for delivering library services.

In order to fulfil the commitment to user-centred design, an extensive requirements gathering process was undertaken in the early stages of the redesign. This included:

- an all-staff facilitated focus group;
- two staff and patron web surveys;
- a number of patron focus groups;
- staff and patron one-on-one interviews;
- stakeholder focus groups for key components such as e-commerce and the functional requirements for the new content management system (CMS); and
- a number of “web assemblies” for staff representing the various VPL locations and job classifications.

The information from the requirements gathering sessions was used to craft ten personas: conglomerate personalities who encapsulated traits typical of key demographics among library users. These were used throughout the remainder of the redesign to inform the process and ensure that choices made reflected the actual expectations and behaviours of key groups of VPL patrons.

The compilation of functional requirements resulted in the selection of the Expression Engine CMS, produced by Ellis Labs, to run the site.

The initial information architecture and wireframes for the new site went through two rounds of usability testing with Vancouver-based usability experts, performance by design, before being married with the graphic design prepared by staff from the company Karo design. At this point Open Road Communications began development work on the new website, and once the framework was complete VPL staff began the process of migrating content from the old site into the Expression Engine CMS. In spite of an extensive weed of content over the prior months, content migration was still a massive task which required 16 staff working full-time for a month to complete. Approximately, 1,000 static HTML pages from the old website were transformed into just over 10,000 dynamic content objects in the Expression Engine CMS, with much duplicate and redundant content being removed along the way.

With the migration complete, the site entered a period of stringent quality assurance testing before launching to the public on 4 February 2008. Figure 3 shows the homepage of the VPL website in 2008.

4. The virtual branch of VPL

4.1 User focus

The overarching philosophy of the new website is best illustrated by the series of rotating photographs that occupy the largest single space on the homepage.



Vancouver Public Library

VPL for Kids | Teens | Print-Disabled | Text Size: A A A

Library Catalogue Search VPL.ca

VPL in 日本語 | Français | 中文 | Español | हिन्दी | 한국어 | Việt Ngữ

Using the Library
Get a Library Card
Borrowing
Ask a Librarian
Computers & Internet

Find Books, DVDs & More...
New & Popular
VPL Recommends
Research Guides & Suggestions by Topic
Newspapers, Articles, Encyclopedias & More

Locations & Hours
Branches & Hours
Outreach Services
InfoAction Research

Events & Courses
Book Clubs
Children's Programs
Current Events
Room Rentals

My Account
Renew Items
Check Requests (Holds)
Check Your Due Dates
Check for Fines

You are here: Home >



Featured Books and DVDs >



The Doctor Who Was Followed by Ghosts: A Memoir >

Li Qunying
910.92 L89d

Dr. Qunying's haunting memoir describes personal recollections of serving as a doctor in the Civil and the Korean Wars, and of being forced into the countryside with her exiled husband during the Cultural Revolution where she worked as a barefoot doctor.

Books / DVDs / CDs - Search the Catalogue >

Keywords in Title

Also try: Advanced Catalogue search | Joint Catalogue & Database Search (All In One) (Login required)

Ask a Librarian >

Chat With Us Email Us Call Us Visit Us

Find Your Nearest Branch

Enter your postal code: GO

Locate by map

News and Events >



New Kensington Branch Opening Soon
posted on October 16, 2008

The new Kensington Branch Library is almost ready to open its doors to the community. The opening date will be announced here as soon as possible.

Building a virtual branch at VPL

145

Figure 3.
VPL website, 2008

These pictures are of actual VPL users who were photographed going about their day-to-day activities in the library, and the quotes were taken directly from their conversations with the photographer about their opinions of VPL. Each picture links to a particular library resource, providing functionality as well as a front and centre commitment to our library patrons. This site, like the library itself, is all about the user.

4.2 Homepage

The homepage of any website is its front room, the first impression it makes on anyone using it. It is also the most hotly contested real estate on a library website, which often has a huge range of content types – all of significance to large proportions of the user base – competing for space. VPL's homepage acts as a showcase for its resources, collections and services and a portal for users to enter the site proper, while maintaining an attractive look and feel with the use of background colour and graphics.

In addition to the patron photographs, the homepage features new and recommended items from the VPL catalogue, a feed of the latest library news and events, and direct access to key functions such as the catalogue search, the branch postal code finder, and all of the various options for asking a reference question either online or in person.

4.3 Architecture and navigation

Content on the site is task-oriented, grouped into different sections depending on the activity the patron is carrying out:

- *About the library* contains information about VPL’s history, policies, management, and employment opportunities.
- *Using the library* provides users with information on how to get a library card, book a computer, request and renew items, and use the library catalogue effectively.
- *Find books, DVDs and more* is an entry point to the library’s catalogue, electronic resources, new and recommended items, and specialised collections such as the historical photographs collection.
- *Events and courses* includes a searchable calendar of current programmes and training courses and an events archive containing photographs and video footage.
- *My account* gives direct access to a patron’s individual library record and associated functionality.

Clear, consistent navigation is provided in four ways on every page of the site. The first is a top navigation bar that includes headers and (on the homepage only) sub-headers for the main content groupings. The second is a “breadcrumb trail” at the top of the page that allows users to keep track of where they are on the site. The third is a slim navigation bar at the foot of the page content that directs users to key individual pages such as the library contacts list. The fourth navigation aid is a “fat footer”. Fat footers, which are becoming an increasingly popular use for the “free” real estate at the foot of webpages, provide a comprehensive list of links to both the most popular and essential but lesser used content, effectively providing the user with a full site map on every single page of the site. Figure 4 shows the navigation header and footer for the VPL website.

4.4 Inclusivity

A key concern for the redesign, given the strong ESL demographic in Vancouver, was the inclusion of content and navigation options for users who speak languages other than English. The old site contained a small amount of multilingual content, including new book lists, web links and basic information about getting a library card.



Figure 4.
Navigation header and footer

However, reaching this content required at least three clicks from the homepage, taking the user down a pathway like the following:

Home > Central Library > Multilingual Services > Booklists

Clearly, not an easy task for a non-English speaker to complete! Poor usage statistics for multilingual web content on the old site were certainly a reflection of the fact that the navigation path to content in other languages was not only rather lengthy, but also in English.

Eight languages were flagged as a priority for translation, based on overall language demographics in the city of Vancouver:

- (1) Chinese.
- (2) French.
- (3) Hindi.
- (4) Japanese.
- (5) Korean.
- (6) Punjabi.
- (7) Spanish.
- (8) Vietnamese.

Staff reviewed web content to identify core information that should be translated as a first priority for non English-speaking patrons. A key concern was that although a full translation of the site was out of scope for the redesign project, multilingual patrons should have access to as wide a range of VPL web services as possible. In addition to individual introductions to the multilingual areas in each language, translated content includes:

- Circulation information: loan periods, fines, etc.
- How to get a library card.
- Catalogue cheatsheets.
- New books.
- Lists of annotated web links.

VPL hires multilingual staff for its Multilingual Services division, and offers a language differential as part of the salary for information staff whose job specification includes conducting parts of their work (be it patron interaction, teaching courses or translating print or web content) in a second language. Consequently, six of the eight languages in question are spoken by VPL employees. For content in these languages, translation was carried out inhouse; for the remaining two languages, Korean and Vietnamese, translation services were provided by an external company.

In spite of the non-Roman alphabets, most of the translated content was simply copied and pasted into the Expression Engine CMS. The only two languages not recognised by the CMS were Hindi and Punjabi; Hindi content had to be rewritten using a separate online translator before being added to the site, and work on the Punjabi content is ongoing.

Every page of the site includes both a header and footer with links to the multilingual content in the seven available languages, including the homepage.

ESL patrons now have a clear route to helpful, informative library content in their own language, regardless of their entry point to the site. Figure 5 shows the global header indicating language options.

VPL is still keen to improve the web content it offers to multilingual patrons, and the creation of a Chinese version of the entire website has been flagged as a key project for the near future.

5. Perpetual beta

Another key change with the new website was the resolution to keep it in a perpetual beta state. Unlike the old site, which remained static and unchanging and inevitably ended up gathering dust in the wake of the technological advances taking place on the wider web, the new site will be flexible, responsive to user feedback, and willing and prepared to change.

User feedback, from both staff and patrons, on the new website has been carefully logged since its launch, and ongoing work is being carried out to improve or change items flagged as a high priority, such as the revision of some of the labelling on the site and an extensive reorganisation of the library's annotated web links.

As the one-year anniversary of the site launch approaches in 2009 VPL plans to solicit additional feedback with targeted web surveys and interviews. Based on feedback from the first nine months, a plan for priority improvements and changes to the site has been created, and usability testing will be carried out on the most significant items before they are implemented.

VPL is strongly committed to keeping the future evolution of content and overall direction of the site in the hands of the people who use it, which means ensuring that both patrons and staff have a strong voice when it comes to expressing their satisfaction levels with the library's web services. The challenge for the VPL will be to be sympathetic and responsive without being overly reactive: to identify clearly those areas where the usability and usefulness of the site can be improved for significant numbers of users rather than addressing concerns that are only of a concern to a few, or that may fix issues for one group of users while creating problems for another. A structured, planned approach to change, supported by hard evidence from user testing, will help ensure the success of continued improvements to the site.

6. Interaction and exploration

6.1 Online community development

One of VPL's key goals for the new website was to open up the traditional "walled garden" and invite users to participate actively in the site: conversing, contributing content, and interacting with staff and with each other. Library websites have traditionally very much taken the form of a lecture, whereas for some years now Web 2.0 tools and technologies have turned the wider web into a conversation, a back-and-forth between the content creator and their audience.

Figure 5.
Global header showing
language options



One of the key decisions made during the redesign process was that given the profusion of tools that already exist for this purpose, there was little point in the library trying to reinvent the wheel. Rather than build venues for dialogue within the site's CMS, a more efficient and effective strategy would be to seek out the best of the existing tools and use these to engage our users. This was supported by findings from the requirements gathering, which showed that patrons were more interested in engaging with the library on existing social networking sites than in seeing content such as discussion forums or wikis developed on www.vpl.ca.

This strategy of “mash up versus build up” not only saved VPL the laborious work of developing inhouse solutions, but also enabled the library to expand beyond its own web space and engage users in the online spaces of their choosing. This is particularly important in the context of VPL's commitment to community development. One of the VPL's core service development strategies is the belief that the library can only develop truly relevant services by going out into the community, building relationships with diverse community groups and allowing them to engage honestly and openly with the library about what they want and need from it. By extending the library's online presence beyond the boundaries of its own website, VPL has created an opportunity to take this community development model into the online space.

6.2 Web 2.0

6.2.1 Strategy. One of the most significant challenges that libraries face with Web 2.0 is simply how to choose between the plethora of tools and technologies that exist on the modern web. Moreover, when a library develops content using a third party platform – especially a free platform with no associated licensing terms or guarantees – they surrender a measure of control over the future of that content.

VPL's response to these two issues was to take a very targeted, strategic approach to selecting tools for adoption and online spaces for expansion, and to treat all new ventures as pilot projects that could easily be set aside if they proved to be unsuccessful.

The following broad guidelines were used to select the first round of Web 2.0 tools:

- Is there a possibility for greater engagement with current VPL web users?
- Will this create opportunities to reach current non-users of the library?
- Is there existing or potential interest in VPL and its services?
- Is there any other relevant connection for the library to build on, e.g. local Vancouver interest?
- How much workload will be involved in establishing and maintaining a presence on this site?
- Are there new marketing/promotional opportunities for the library on this site?

Library staff looked for websites where at least one of these factors was present, and where the site is currently the “killer app” for a particular purpose and/or audience. For example, until recently MySpace was the most popular of the social networking sites, but has now been overtaken by Facebook.

6.2.2 Web 2.0 in action. The following examples are not comprehensive, but illustrate how VPL is making this strategic approach to selecting web tools and external sites an effective way of promoting its services and engaging users.

With a Vancouver network of almost hundreds of thousands of people, Facebook was a natural choice for a VPL presence. Rather than straightforward profiles, Facebook offers organisations “pages” to which interested users subscribe as fans. Pages offer a variety of features including a discussion board, hosting space for photos and videos, events listings, activity reports, and promotional tools including the ability to send updates to all current fans.

VPL’s page is still in the pilot phase, but has already accumulated more than 420 fans. Photos and video have been uploaded by library patrons, and the library’s Marketing and Communications Department uses it extensively to promote library events. Attempts to initiate dialogue on the discussion board have not met with great interest, but interestingly patrons have left many positive comments about the library and its staff on the page “wall”. According to analytics data, the page receives an average of 20 hits a day.

Facebook also offers the opportunity for the creation of third-party applications which users can then add to their individual profiles. Using the widget building site www.widgetbox.com, VPL was able to convert really simple syndication (RSS) feeds from its News and Events updates and new titles lists into Facebook applications, allowing Facebook users to have this information delivered directly to their profiles.

The value of a Facebook presence was reinforced recently during a visit by one of VPL’s Community Librarians to a local community group, where someone commented that the library would only be successful in engaging that particular group online “if you’re on Facebook”. Figure 6 shows some “wall posts” on VPL’s Facebook page.

Twitter was also a logical place for the library to setup a presence. Twitter is a micro-blogging site where users post brief, 140-character updates to let registered followers know about their current status. One of the great advantages of Twitter is that many users have updates sent directly to their cellphones via text message, which makes it an extremely effective vehicle for communicating up-to-the-minute news and events. It also requires absolutely minimal workload on the part of library staff to maintain, as the brevity of the updates means they can be written in a matter of a few seconds.

Twitter also has an in-built search, which made it easy for VPL staff to see if there was any existing interest in the library. Quick searches for “VPL” and “Vancouver Public Library” revealed commentary ranging from reaction to library programmes to discussion about the quality of the wi-fi. Within hours of setting up an account and making a few initial posts, a Twitter user had commented: “Pretty damned amazing: @VPL (Vancouver Public Library) *twitters!* With useful info, to boot!”. Figure 7 shows an example of some VPL “twitters”.

The VPL Twitter account currently has more than 250 followers, and in addition to being a great promotional tool for the library is also a consistent source of positive, enthusiastic comments and suggestions from patrons.

VPL is also leveraging popular media hosting sites to manage content such as photographs (Flickr) and videos (YouTube). A quick search of Flickr reveals thousands of photos of the library and a large number of user groups devoted to pictures of VPL’s buildings, and with 30 million registered users (Calore, 2008) the site offers enormous possibilities for reaching a wider audience than existing visitors to www.vpl.ca. VPL is using Flickr to promote library events and highlight key news such as the completion of the new Kensington Branch. Figure 8 shows some of the photo sets of VPL on Flickr.



Figure 6.
Wall posts on the
Vancouver Public Library
Facebook page

Source: www.facebook.com/pages/Vancouver-BC/Vancouver-Public-Library/15388201565

Likewise, YouTube is currently the third most popular site on the internet behind Google and Yahoo (Alexa, 2008), and contains a wealth of existing VPL-related content including tourist videos, clips from feature films, and a private tour of the publicly inaccessible rooftop garden. VPL currently uses YouTube to offer video content ranging from events footage to video tutorials. VPL users who have encountered content on YouTube include parents who have requested the addition of popular songs and rhymes from library storytimes, and teachers who have subsequently asked permission to use the video tutorials to introduce K-12 students to library resources. Figure 9 shows details of some items from VPL on YouTube.



Figure 7.
VPL twitters

Source: <http://twitter.com/VPL>

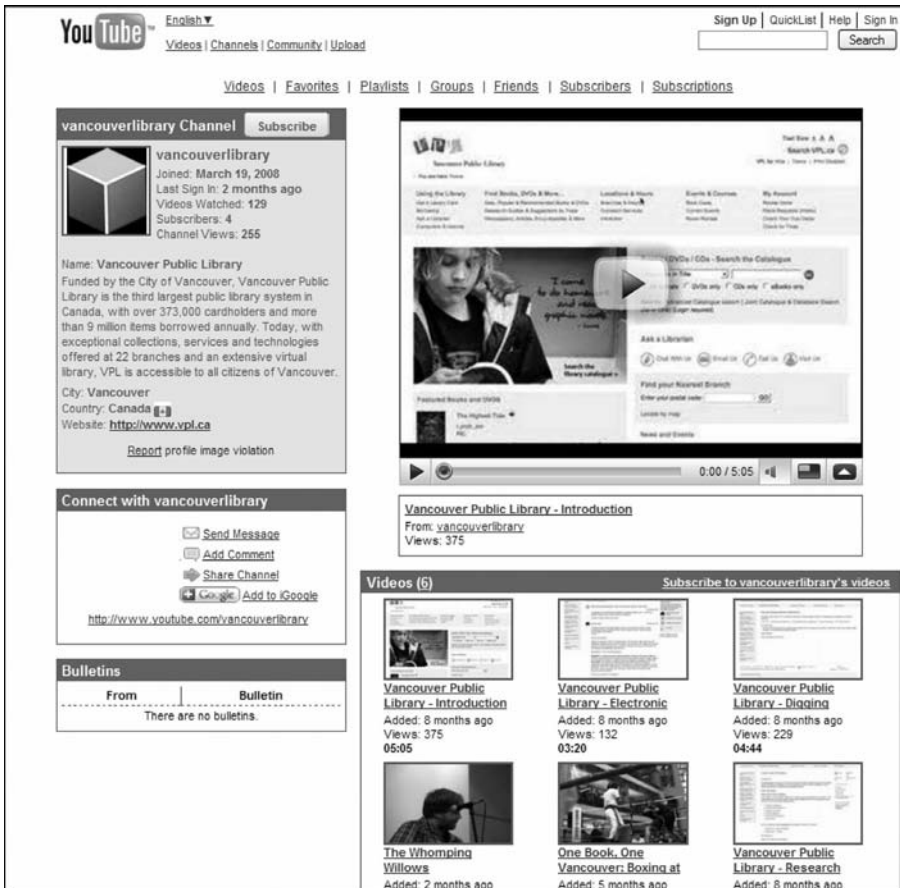


Figure 8.
Flickr photo sets

Source: www.flickr.com/photos/vancouverpubliclibrary/sets/

These are just illustrative examples of the kind of work VPL is doing with Web 2.0 tools and technologies. Other venues that have either been explored or are currently in progress include:

- *MySpace.com*. This is declining in popularity and the plan is to hand this page over to the library's Teen Advisory Group to revamp it and see if there is any ongoing interest among teens.



Source: www.youtube.com/user/vancouverlibrary

Figure 9.
Boxing, rock bands and
web tutorials – VPL on
YouTube

- *delicious.com*. This is used to manage the library's collection of more than 5,000 annotated web links).
- *yahoo.com* for events promotion.

6.2.3 Management. Managing workload is a key component of successful integration of Web 2.0 tools and technologies into a library's web services. One of VPL's key strategies was to work with tools where the workload involved in setting up and maintaining a presence is fairly minimal. The library's Facebook page, for example, took an hour or so of staff time to setup and populate with initial content.

Ongoing addition of content by library staff (in addition to the content added voluntarily by users) is done using Facebook's in-built templates, which are quick and easy to use. For something like a library event announcement, where the content has already been created by VPL's Marketing and Communications Department for other marketing material, adding it to the Facebook page takes a minute or so.

The Facebook applications which complement the library page took somewhat longer to setup because the RSS had to be passed through Widgetbox to create the widget which was then converted to a Facebook application. However, because these applications draw their content from RSS feeds on the main VPL site, they require no ongoing staff time for maintenance: a significant value add for the library.

Twitter, which is proving to be a very effective marketing and promotional tool, is even lower maintenance than Facebook. The account itself took a matter of minutes to setup, and the microblogging format means that posting updates literally takes just seconds of staff time. Twitter does allow people to respond directly to VPL by prefacing their tweets (updates) with @VPL; but again, managing these direct comments and providing them with answers requires only a few moments.

Both YouTube and Flickr have tools for uploading content that take a few minutes per photo batch or video.

The choice of tools that require a relatively minimal amount of time to setup and maintain goes a long way to addressing the concerns of the typical librarian, always hard-pressed for time, about the longevity of these sites and the value of developing content for them. There is an inherent risk in putting library content in the hands of a third party: not only in the possibility that the site itself might cease to exist, but also because the pace of technology is moving so exponentially quickly that it is impossible to predict whether today's killer app will even be on the radar tomorrow.

VPL's key goal is to be where the library's users are; to have a presence in the online spaces that are meaningful and relevant to patrons. That might not be the same place tomorrow as it is today, but by strategically targeting the places where the library sets up a web presence, and populating those places with relevant, appropriate content that does not require an enormous commitment of time and effort on the library's part, VPL has ensured that if its web users drop their current interest in, say, Twitter and move on to the next big thing, the library will be ready to put Twitter down and move along with them.

This is something of a cultural shift compared to the traditional level of investment in library-created web content such as study guides or booklists, but in this space – the Web 2.0 space – it is not just appropriate, but essential for libraries to remain flexible and responsive. While there is still very much a place for traditional web content, Web 2.0 tools require a different approach to be an effective vehicle for delivering library services. Only by acknowledging and adopting this approach can libraries remain relevant to tech-savvy web users.

To ensure that the VPL's external web presence is appropriately managed and that a planned and systematic approach is taken to the library's expansion into social networking sites and Web 2.0 tools, specific responsibility for these issues has been added to the specifications for two jobs: the Senior Librarian for website and Community Development and the Web Services Librarian. In addition to a variety of other duties, these VPL staff oversee the development of existing web services, both on and off the main VPL site, and plan for the future.

Successful pilots, like the Facebook and Twitter examples cited here, inevitably lead to further questions and issues. Current work that falls within the portfolio of the web librarians includes the rollout of the pilot projects to other library branches and divisions; developing standards for library-created content (for example, how often

should a Twitter account ideally be updated? What kinds of content should be posted to a Facebook page?); and producing a legal Terms of Service document and guidelines for managing inappropriate user-contributed content.

7. Conclusion

Opening the doors to the community does not necessarily mean sacrificing quality or control: rather, it creates an opportunity for users to be fully involved in both the form and direction of a library's web services. Through a systematic, thoughtful and user-centred approach to both the creation of a new website and the adoption of Web 2.0 tools and technologies to enhance that site, VPL has demonstrated its commitment to turning its public web space into a true virtual branch: a space where the entire community is welcome, and has a voice.

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